

"In the round tower of my heart": A personal collection of poetry

Compiled by

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Cover photo by Brian A. Salmons,
"View of 'Sandy Remix' at Brooklyn Botanic Gardens"
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Special thanks to the memory of
Leila Annette Parrish (1952-2003), a.k.a "Mrs. Parrish",
one of my English teachers at Edgewater High School,
who first inspired a love for poetry and literature.

Introduction

Last year, I re-discovered poetry. Not since high school, when I caved in to the prospect of repeated classroom discussions and homework and found that I actually liked what I was reading, liked the process of decoding words and references to history, culture and literature, and liked how I could imagine the meaning intended by the poet, not since then - 1995, almost 20 years ago - has reading poetry even occurred to me as worthwhile. Not until the year 2013. Nothing momentous occurred in my life that year. The preceding and following years, yes, and those were surely contributing factors. But basically, the interest arose just because, now, I am that much older, more mature, invested in life. I am certain, specifically, that this renewed interest in poetry stems from the personal relevance of two themes common to many poems: memories, and the fear of losing something important. These themes are related. Memories are necessarily of events in the past, of things that no longer exist. Reminiscences cradle things lost or taken or discarded, by time, by death, by carelessness, poor judgment. Before I had children, I didn't think that much about death. Now I see potential peril in everything. When my kids were babies, I didn't worry (too much) about how they themselves would cope with social rejection, with important decisions, with peril. Those were certain, but distant, concerns. Before getting married, the work of love was a contingency I understood only in outline from readings of bell hooks, Milton Mayeroff and Erich Fromm. Now, marriage is my second (or first?) job. Before all of this – before wife and kids – the enduring message of poetry was not all that bothersome to me, just part of a "natural attitude - the unquestioned acceptance of the things and experiences of daily living", to quote David Seamon. Now, I question my daily life, usually along the lines of "If you died today..." Too many things matter.

Not surprisingly, many of the poems I discovered in 2013 concerned topics like birth, childhood, growing up, parenting and letting go. A few were about death. Others, less somber. If I remember correctly, I found most of these pieces at poets.org, the website of the American Academy of Poets, to which I am grateful for making them available on the Web. Who knows if I would ever have discovered them otherwise? There is no doubt that my life was enriched by reading and thinking about these poems, which I kept handy on neatly folded pieces of paper to be read in little moments throughout the day. I've probably never discussed them with anyone, although I know I've bothered my Facebook friends with a couple of random posts about them. Nonetheless, now that my consumption of poetry has slowed down into 2014, I feel compelled enough to memorialize and share something of my experience with these poems, significant as they are to me, with my family and friends. Like Longfellow and that special hour, these poems have a place in the round-tower of my heart. I hope you, too, enjoy this little anthology, grouped together for the first time under what is decidedly a poor pretense for a theme: poems discovered by Brian Salmons in the year 2013. Anyway, here they are...

Orlando, Florida
March 4, 2014

Dedication

To my wife, Courtney, and our children.

MUMBLEGITC EXPIALIDOL
SUPERCA LAERAGELI
TCLDUG

A Goodnight

William Carlos Williams

Go to sleep--though of course you will not--
to tideless waves thundering slantwise against
strong embankments, rattle and swish of spray
dashed thirty feet high, caught by the lake wind,
scattered and strewn broadcast in over the steady
car rails! Sleep, sleep! Gulls' cries in a wind-gust
broken by the wind; calculating wings set above
the field of waves breaking.

Go to sleep to the lunge between foam-crests,
refuse churned in the recoil. Food! Food!
Offal! Offal! that holds them in the air, wave-white
for the one purpose, feather upon feather, the wild
chill in their eyes, the hoarseness in their voices--
sleep, sleep . . .

Gentlefooted crowds are treading out your lullaby.
Their arms nudge, they brush shoulders,
hitch this way then that, mass and surge at the crossings--
lullaby, lullaby! The wild-fowl police whistles,
the enraged roar of the traffic, machine shrieks:
it is all to put you to sleep,
to soften your limbs in relaxed postures,
and that your head slip sidewise, and your hair loosen
and fall over your eyes and over your mouth,
brushing your lips wistfully that you may dream,
sleep and dream--

A black fungus springs out about the lonely church doors--
sleep, sleep. The Night, coming down upon
the wet boulevard, would start you awake with his
message, to have in at your window. Pay no
heed to him. He storms at your sill with
cooings, with gesticulations, curses!
You will not let him in. He would keep you from sleeping.
He would have you sit under your desk lamp
brooding, pondering; he would have you
slide out the drawer, take up the ornamented dagger
and handle it. It is late, it is nineteen-nineteen--
go to sleep, his cries are a lullaby;
his jabbering is a sleep-well-my-baby; he is
a crackbrained messenger.

The maid waking you in the morning
when you are up and dressing,
the rustle of your clothes as you raise them--
it is the same tune.

At table the cold, greenish, split grapefruit, its juice
on the tongue, the clink of the spoon in
your coffee, the toast odors say it over and over.

The open street-door lets in the breath of
the morning wind from over the lake.
The bus coming to a halt grinds from its sullen brakes--
lullaby, lullaby. The crackle of a newspaper,
the movement of the troubled coat beside you--
sleep, sleep, sleep . . .
It is the sting of snow, the burning liquor of
the moonlight, the rush of rain in the gutters packed
with dead leaves: go to sleep, go to sleep.
And the night passes--and never passes--

— 1921

Daughters, 1900

Marylin Nelson Waniek

Five daughters, in the slant light on the porch,
are bickering. The eldest has come home
with new truths she can hardly wait to teach.

She lectures them: the younger daughters search
the sky, elbow each others' ribs, and groan.
Five daughters, in the slant light on the porch

and blue-sprigged dresses, like a stand of birch
saplings whose leaves are going yellow-brown
with new truths. They can hardly wait to teach,

themselves, to be called "Ma'am," to march
high-heeled across the hanging bridge to town.
Five daughters. In the slant light on the porch

Pomp lowers his paper for a while, to watch
the beauties he's begotten with his Ann:
these new truths they can hardly wait to teach.

The eldest sniffs, "A lady doesn't scratch."
The third snorts back, "Knock, knock: nobody home."
The fourth concedes, "Well, maybe not in church..."
Five daughters in the slant light on the porch.

– 1990

Answer to a Child's Question

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Do you ask what the birds say? The Sparrow, the Dove,
The Linnet and Thrush say, "I love and I love!"
In the winter they're silent—the wind is so strong;
What it says, I don't know, but it sings a loud song.
But green leaves, and blossoms, and sunny warm weather,
And singing, and loving—all come back together.
But the Lark is so brimful of gladness and love,
The green fields below him, the blue sky above,
That he sings, and he sings; and for ever sings he—
"I love my Love, and my Love loves me!"

— 1802

My Daughter's First Week

Gennady Aygi

the quietness
where the child is--seems uneven
within limits--of fragile lightshadows: emptiness!--for
 the world Grows
in her--to Listen
to Itself
in its Fullness

– 1983

Emma Lazarus

Thou two-faced year, Mother of Change and Fate,
Didst weep when Spain cast forth with flaming sword,
The children of the prophets of the Lord,
Prince, priest, and people, spurned by zealot hate.
Hounded from sea to sea, from state to state,
The West refused them, and the East abhorred.
No anchorage the known world could afford,
Close-locked was every port, barred every gate.
Then smiling, thou unveil'dst, O two-faced year,
A virgin world where doors of sunset part,
Saying, "Ho, all who weary, enter here!
There falls each ancient barrier that the art
Of race or creed or rank devised, to rear
Grim bulwarked hatred between heart and heart!"

— 1883

Baby's World

Rabindranath Tagore

I wish I could take a quiet corner in the heart of my baby's very own world.
I know it has stars that talk to him, and a sky that stoops down to his face to amuse him with its silly clouds and rainbows.
Those who make believe to be dumb, and look as if they never could move, come creeping to his window with their stories and with trays crowded with bright toys.
I wish I could travel by the road that crosses baby's mind, and out beyond all bounds;
Where messengers run errands for no cause between the kingdoms of kings of no history;
Where Reason makes kites of her laws and flies them, the Truth sets Fact free from its fetters.

– 1913

When You Are Old

W.B. Yeats

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

— 1893

A Song On the End of the World

Czesław Miłosz, trans. by Anthony Miłosz

On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.

On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.

And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.

Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
No other end of the world will there be,
No other end of the world will there be.

— 1944

Children in a Field

Angela Shaw

They don't wade in so much as they are taken.
Deep in the day, in the deep of the field,
every current in the grasses whispers *burry*
burry, every yellow spreads its perfume
like a rumor, impelling them further on.
It is the way of girls. It is the sway
of their dresses in the summer trance-
light, their bare calves already far-gone
in green. What songs will they follow?
Whatever the wood warbles, whatever storm
or harm the border promises, whatever
calm. Let them go. Let them go traceless
through the high grass and into the willow-
blur, traceless across the lean blue glint
of the river, to the long dark bodies
of the conifers, and over the welcoming
threshold of nightfall.

– 2009

The Love Unfeigned

Geoffrey Chaucer

O Yonge fresshe folkes, he or she,
In which that love up groweth with your age,
Repeyreth hoom from worldly vanitee,
And of your herte up-casteth the visage
To thilke god that after his image
Yow made, and thinketh al nis but a fayre
This world, that passeth sone as floures fayre.

And loveth him, the which that right for love
Upon a cros, our soules for to beye,
First starf, and roos, and sit in hevene a-bove;
For he nil falsen no wight, dar I seye,
That wol his herte al hoolly on him leye.
And sin he best to love is, and most meke,
What nedeth feyned loves for to seke?

– late 1300's

Little America

Jason Shinder

My friend says she is like an empty drawer
being pulled out of the earth.
I am the long neck of the giraffe coming down
to see what she doesn't have.

What holds us chained to the same cold river,
where we are surprised by the circles
we make in the ice? When we talk about the past
it is like pushing stones back into the earth.
Sometimes she digs her nails into her leather bag
to find out where my heart is. The white sleeves
of her shirt are bright with waves when I visit.
When we lie, we live a little longer—
which is unbelievable. If you love
someone, the water moves up from the well.

— 2005

Song on May Morning

John Milton

Now the bright morning Star, Dayes harbinger,
Comes dancing from the East, and leads with her
The Flowry May, who from her green lap throws
The yellow Cowslip, and the pale Primrose.

Hail bounteous May that dost inspire
Mirth and youth, and warm desire,
Woods and Groves, are of thy dressing,
Hill and Dale, doth boast thy blessing.
Thus we salute thee with our early Song,
And welcom thee, and wish thee long.

– 1632

anyone lived in a pretty how town

E.E. Cummings

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did

Women and men(both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain

The Writer

Richard Wilbur

In her room at the prow of the house
Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden,
My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing
From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys
Like a chain hauled over a gunwale.

Young as she is, the stuff
Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:
I wish her a lucky passage.

But now it is she who pauses,
As if to reject my thought and its easy figure.
A stillness greatness, in which

The whole house seems to be thinking,
And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor
Of strokes, and again is silent.

I remember the dazed starling
Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago;
How we stole in, lifted a sash

And retreated, not to affright it;
And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,
We watched the sleek, wild, dark

And iridescent creature
Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove
To the hard floor, or the desk-top,

And wait then, humped and bloody,
For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits
Rose when, suddenly sure,

It lifted off from a chair-back,
Beating a smooth course for the right window
And clearing the sill of the world.

It is always a matter, my darling,
Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
What I wished you before, but harder.

— 1969

Her Father

Thomas Hardy

I met her, as we had privily planned,
Where passing feet beat busily:
She whispered: "Father is at hand!
He wished to walk with me."

His presence as he joined us there
Banished our words of warmth away;
We felt, with cloudings of despair,
What Love must lose that day.

Her crimson lips remained unkissed,
Our fingers kept no tender hold,
His lack of feeling made the tryst
Embarrassed, stiff, and cold.

A cynic ghost then rose and said,
"But is his love for her so small
That, nigh to yours, it may be read
As of no worth at all?

"You love her for her pink and white;
But what when their fresh splendours close?
His love will last her in despite
Of Time, and wrack, and foes."

— 1909

Working Late

Louis Simpson

A light is on in my father's study.
"Still up?" he says, and we are silent,
looking at the harbor lights,
listening to the surf
and the creak of coconut boughs.

He is working late on cases.
No impassioned speech! He argues from evidence,
actually pacing out and measuring,
while the fans revolving on the ceiling
winnow the true from the false.

Once he passed a brass curtain rod
through a head made out of plaster
and showed the jury the angle of fire--
where the murderer must have stood.
For years, all through my childhood,
if I opened a closet . . . bang!
There would be the dead man's head
with a black hole in the forehead.

All the arguing in the world
will not stay the moon.
She has come all the way from Russia
to gaze for a while in a mango tree
and light the wall of a veranda,
before resuming her interrupted journey
beyond the harbor and the lighthouse
at Port Royal, turning away
from land to the open sea.

Yet, nothing in nature changes, from that day to this,
she is still the mother of us all.
I can see the drifting offshore lights,
black posts where the pelicans brood.

And the light that used to shine
at night in my father's study
now shines as late in mine.

The Balloon of the Mind

W.B. Yeats

Hands, do what you're bid:
Bring the balloon of the mind
That bellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed.

– 1917

About Death and Other Things

Aleksandar Ristoric, trans. Charles Simic

How strange will be my death, of which I've been thinking since childhood:
A sedentary old man leaving a small-town library
leans to one side and eventually collapses on the lawn.

I've every reason to believe that I'll experience what the others have experienced
while I climb the stairs carrying my supper in a plastic bag,
not even turning to look at the one who in that moment descends curly-haired and
wearing a party dress.

It could be an ordinary death on a train:
a man who carefully studies the fields and hills in snow,
shuts his eyes folds his hands in his lap, and no longer sees what only a moment ago
he admired.

I'm trying to remember other possibilities and so, here I am once again,
disguised as myself in a small, merry company,
where, after emptying my glass, I fall on the floor laughing, and pulling after me the
tablecloth with the vase full of roses.

My death, of course, would have a spiritual meaning
in some mountain sanatorium for the insane
where croaking we complain to each other in beds with freshly changed sheets.

It could happen that I'll die in some way very different from the one I anticipate:
in the company of my wife and daughter, surrounded by books,
while outside a neighbor is trying to start a car that the night has surprised with snow.

– 2010

The Sick Child

Robert Louis Stevenson

CHILD.

O Mother, lay your hand on my brow!
O mother, mother, where am I now?
Why is the room so gaunt and great?
Why am I lying awake so late?

MOTHER.

Fear not at all: the night is still.
Nothing is here that means you ill -
Nothing but lamps the whole town through,
And never a child awake but you.

CHILD.

Mother, mother, speak low in my ear,
Some of the things are so great and near,
Some are so small and far away,
I have a fear that I cannot say,
What have I done, and what do I fear,
And why are you crying, mother dear?

MOTHER.

Out in the city, sounds begin
Thank the kind God, the carts come in!
An hour or two more, and God is so kind,
The day shall be blue in the window-blind,
Then shall my child go sweetly asleep,
And dream of the birds and the hills of sheep.

— 1913

Learning to Speak

Liz Rosenberg

She was the quietest thing I'd ever seen.
It was so restful, being in her company
For hours, neither of us uttering a word.
I'd read the paper, look up, and she would smile,
Her lips half-pursed, just tucked up at the ends
As if holding a blithe secret.
When I fed her, she'd silently nod and smile,
Like immigrants you see
In train stations or in the movies,
She'd take the bowl from my hands
And nod again and smile again
And neither of us would say a word
From sunup to sunset.
When son and husband came home,
Both talking at once, both talking
With their mouths full,
My daughter and I could only look at them
With our dark quiet eyes.
Siddown, she says now.
I sit down
Without argument.

– 2008

The Children's Hour

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Between the dark and the daylight,
When the night is beginning to lower,
Comes a pause in the day's occupations,
That is known as the Children's Hour.

I hear in the chamber above me
The patter of little feet,
The sound of a door that is opened,
And voices soft and sweet.

From my study I see in the lamplight,
Descending the broad hall stair,
Grave Alice, and laughing Allegra,
And Edith with golden hair.

A whisper, and then a silence:
Yet I know by their merry eyes
They are plotting and planning together
To take me by surprise.

A sudden rush from the stairway,
A sudden raid from the hall!
By three doors left unguarded
They enter my castle wall!

They climb up into my turret
O'er the arms and back of my chair;
If I try to escape, they surround me;
They seem to be everywhere.

They almost devour me with kisses,
Their arms about me entwine,
Till I think of the Bishop of Bingen
In his Mouse-Tower on the Rhine!

Do you think, O blue-eyed banditti,
Because you have scaled the wall,
Such an old mustache as I am
Is not a match for you all!

I have you fast in my fortress,
And will not let you depart,
But put you down into the dungeon

In the round-tower of my heart.

And there will I keep you forever,
Yes, forever and a day,
Till the walls shall crumble to ruin,
And moulder in dust away!

— 1860